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Leadership on the Frontline:

Thriving and surviving in
challenging circumstances

Lessons learned from taking part in a university-led research
project based on the experiences of 18 headteachers from
schools in Belfast, Liverpool and London

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Introduction

Taking part in a university-based research project is a bit like finding yourself in a foreign land without the benefit of language or map. You know you are a perfectly competent and experienced traveller, yet you lack the specific tools for the journey and need to rely on the expertise, tolerance and wisdom of others to reach your destination. The process of the journey was as important for me as the destination. Indeed, this is an ongoing project that is continuing to develop and grow, involving other areas and headteachers in the coming years using a similar formula of experiential learning to the analytical and research-based quest for the ingredients that make up successful leadership in schools in challenging circumstances.

This search for the elixir of leadership has a quality of the Holy Grail about it. There is no one answer. There are lessons to be learned and passed on, models to be used and ideas to be further investigated. This research project has indicated some of the ingredients, that might make up this elixir. It certainly does not conclude that leaders of challenging schools must be born and not made, or that they must be of one particular type or background. The learning for all of those involved in this project has been powerful in itself and I present that learning here: both what has affected me personally as the headteacher of a large comprehensive (not on the frontline) and also that which I have observed and recorded as the project activities have progressed.

The context

There were initially 18 headteachers involved in this project from London, Liverpool and Belfast. All of the headteachers lead urban schools in challenging circumstances, defined in terms of their socio-economic, cultural, community and educational contexts. The selection of schools was cross-phase, including nursery, primary, secondary and secondary special schools. They reflected the range of school type operating in each location: denominational, integrated, mixed, single sex and community. The participants in the project were selected by their LEAs as being successful in moving their schools forward.

The project questions and methods

The research team worked to the detailed brief set out in a framing paper. We were looking at “the practical, moral and ethical dilemmas, which emerge when confronted with extreme situations”. The project has worked around three interlocking themes:

- leadership for what?
- leadership in practice
- the implications of leading challenging schools for the person and the role

All these themes were firmly based on the context and community in which the leadership activities took place.

This project is ongoing, but the following activities have been completed:

- preparation of a framing paper
- exploration of relevant literature
- individual interviews with each of the 18 headteachers in their schools
- analysis of the information in the interviews used to set up a developmental conference
- a one-day developmental conference held in Belfast, including school visits
- analysis of the information from the conference
- e-conferencing with conference participants to reflect on the learning
- a diary exercise to explore three incidents relating to policy/practice that had occurred during one three-week period before Christmas
- analysis of this information and preparation for the second developmental conference
- further e-conferencing/hotseating hosted by NCSL
- a second developmental conference held in London, including school visits

Findings

The evidence gathered from the research process detailed above suggests the following:

The headteachers

- Headteachers in challenging schools are driven by a personal passion, which may be founded on a variety of personal and career backgrounds. All share a steely determination to get the best for their pupils.
- Headteachers in challenging schools know they are part of a wider community and address the issues that relate to this. They recognise that they need to read their communities, to know them well, to go sometimes with them but sometimes against them. They use a variety of strategies to intervene in their fragile communities.
- They defend and nurture the principles they believe in and the vision they hold. They step in to defend this vision against attack. They show most frustration and annoyance when this vision is abused by staff, pupils, parents or the wider community.
- They work hard to develop the vision in all stakeholders.
- They model the learning and repeat the message to all.

Passing on the knowledge

- Developmental conferences that are small enough for participants to get to know each other and trust each other are an excellent way of passing on leadership knowledge.
- The research tools used in this research project are a useful way of developing a shared language to discuss leadership.
- School visits with a research focus can generate powerful questions about practice.
- Cross-phase working benefits all and breaks down the barriers between sectors.
- Good quality collaborative work occurs when you feel confident that someone understands your situation and that the process of exchanging ideas and information is two-way.

- The career route to becoming a head is often a matter of chance, even with NPQH. Many candidates for headships in schools in challenging circumstances will not have experience working in a challenging school. A short time spent in this setting could open up possibilities for training deputy heads. An exchange system of deputies could offer a way of giving everybody experience in different settings and thus build a bigger pool of those capable and willing to work in challenging circumstances. A mentoring system with heads in differing circumstances could also be beneficial in this regard.
- Outside agencies need to be more responsive to the needs of the children in challenging schools. This is not only about public services collaborating, as envisaged by the Children Act, but also about appropriate resources being available at the right time. Some schools have benefited from money through the inner city regeneration projects but too many are still working in cramped, drab and unsuitable buildings, which need immediate improvement. A poor working environment makes it much harder to improve learning and build stronger communities.

My personal learning

- Research-based evidence is a positive way of moving a school forward.
- Vision is all. Hold on to it, spread it and keep generating the practice which comes from it.
- Build your stakeholder community.
- Schools not in challenging circumstances can be brave.
- Pay attention to values in your staff as well as the skills and knowledge they need.
- Listen to pupils – they hold the key to personalised learning.
- Model the learning and get others to do so too. Remember to succession plan and develop staff capabilities at all levels. Holding on to and developing good staff is vital for survival.
- Develop and use a shared language to discuss learning all the time and with everybody.
- Find innovative ways to collaborate across phases in a meaningful way, which suits you and your agenda. In most communities, all agencies are dealing with the same group of needy families over and over again, so it is good to share strategies and experiences.

Research associate reports available in autumn 2004

In Search of the X-Factor: A group enquiry into the secret of maintaining continuous school success, Marie Graham, Headteacher, Roseberry Infant School, Stockton-on-Tees

Know Where You Are Going: How five headteachers led innovations that go beyond the National Curriculum and national strategies to enhance children's learning, John Grove, Belleville Primary School, Battersea, London

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Growing Your Own Leaders: The impact of professional development on school improvement, Penny Castagnoli, Headteacher, Beaconsfield High School and Nigel Cook, Headteacher, The Disraeli School

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